Friendly captivity:

Camp Roberts once held Italian prisoners of war

HELD AT THE CAMP

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A dizzying series of ordeals catapulted the soldiers of Mussolini's army from one side of the globe – and the war - to the other

By Catherine Merlo

On a winter's afternoon in early February 1945, a soccer team of Italian prisoners of war from Camp Roberts, Calif., played the school team at nearby Paso Robles High School, beating the local squad with a score of 3 to 1.

"Soccer being the national game in Italy, the Italian prisoners and referee, although unable to understand much English, were proficient," the Paso Robles Press reported Feb. 8, 1945, under a headline that proclaimed, "Italian Prisoners Wallop High School."

It may surprise many Americans to know that Italian prisoners of war were held at Camp Roberts during World War II. But, in fact, more than 50,000 Italian prisoners of war were interned across the United States from 1942-46, including about 400 at Camp Roberts. The United States also held 375,000 German prisoners of war inside its borders during the same time, with about 900 at Camp Roberts' East Garrison.

But the experience of the Italian prisoners of war differed vastly from their German counterparts. For the duration of the war, German prisoners in America remained closely guarded behind barbed wire. They were fed, clothed and given ample opportunities for recreation — but always regarded as the enemy.

It was all very different for the Italian prisoners, thanks to a series of major wartime events that took place shortly after their capture.

BEFORE CAMP ROBERTS

By the time the first Italian soldiers arrived on the oak-dotted hills of Camp Roberts in the spring of 1944, they had undergone a dizzying series of ordeals that had catapulted them from one side of the globe – and the war - to the other.

Virtually all of the Italian prisoners of war who were held in the United States during World War II had been captured, along with German units, in the spring of 1943 by Allied forces on the battlefields of North Africa or during the invasion of Sicily several weeks later. For months before, the soldiers of Mussolini's army had struggled with a shortage of food, weapons and equipment. They had been bombed, strafed and bombarded by the Allies, and their morale was low.

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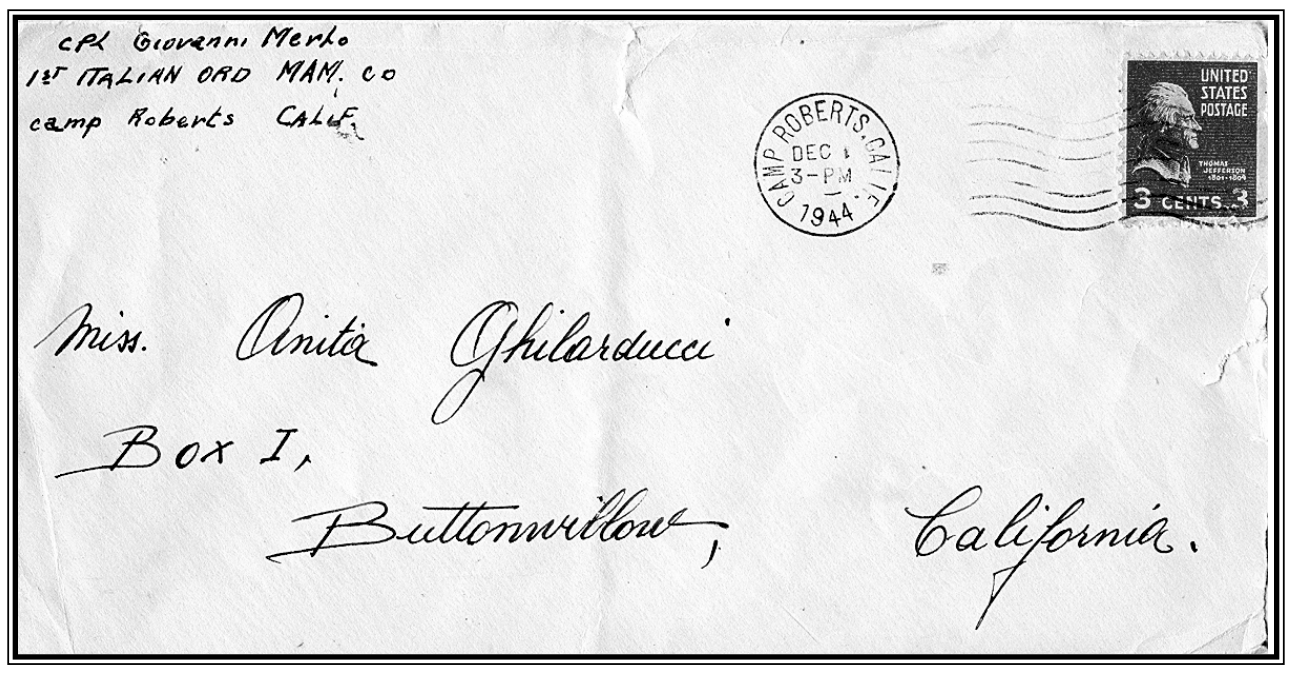
As the war progressed, conditions among the Italian forces deteriorated. "The Italian soldier ate worse in the army than anywhere," he said. "Many times we didn't even eat; we would go three days without eating."

The 6-foot, blue-eyed Puccinelli had been drafted into the Italian army in 1941. He was 21 years old when his unit surrendered to the Americans in Sicily on July 20, 1943. (Less than a year later, he would find himself at Camp Roberts.)



A LETTER HOME

This letter from 1944 bearing the postmark of Camp Roberts is from Italian POW Giovanni Merlo to his fiancee, Anita Ghilarducci, in Buttenwillow (near Bakersfield). Merlo was held at Camp Roberts during WWII. He later married Ghilarducci and raised a family.

Conditions did not improve with the Italians' capture. The Allied forces were overwhelmed by the large numbers of Axis prisoners they took in North Africa and Sicily. The sea of captives included more than 500,000 Italian soldiers, according to Louis E. Keefer's 1992 definitive book, "Italian Prisoners of War in America - 1942-1946: Captives or Allies?"

Unprepared, the Allies had little food or water to give the prisoners, who would live on a near-starvation diet for the next several weeks.

Voyage to prison camps

Immediately after their capture, both Italian and German prisoners were shipped to holding camps in Bizerte, Tunisia in North Africa. After a few days, they were transported to Oran, Algeria. From there, they boarded ocean-going vessels, including many Liberty ships, and sailed away to imprisonment, wearing the clothes they had been captured in.

Some of the Italian prisoners were taken to Australia, India, South Africa, England and Canada for the rest of the war. And 50,000 Italian men — soldiers, officers, even generals — headed across the Atlantic to the United States on a voyage that took about 25 days. Pietro Ghilarducci of Tassignano, Italy, was one of the Italian prisoners of war who made the crossing to America on a Liberty ship in August 1943. He had been captured in Sicily on July 24.

"Nobody believed we were going to the United States because we knew it only took seven to nine days to get to New York from Europe," Ghilarducci remembered in 1996 at his home in the Italian province of Tuscany. "But there were many ships traveling together in convoys and they didn't go very quickly. There was a fear of German U-boats. We had two attacks during our crossing after we passed Gibraltar, but we were never hit.

"We had many difficulties because the Americans found themselves with a lot of prisoners," Ghilarducci said. "They didn't have much food to give us because they didn't know there would be so many of us. We had very little to eat, just a glass of water and one little can of food per day. It was like that on the ship until we reached New York."

Thin and weakened, the Italian prisoners landed at one of three U.S. ports: Brooklyn, N.Y., Boston, Mass., or Norfolk, Va. In each port, a similar process took place. The men showered for the first time since their capture. Puccinelli, who arrived in Brooklyn on Sept. 14, 1943, remembered they were deloused with a spray of powdered chemical. The prisoners received new clothes, marked with large white PW identification letters. They also filled out Red Cross cards that would be used to notify their families of their prisoner-of-war status. Many of these Red Cross cards, however, would not reach their destinations, especially those in northern Italy, until the war was over in the spring of 1945.

Within hours, the Italian soldiers were put aboard trains, and sent to special prisoner-of-war camps across the United States. Of more immediate importance, the Italian prisoners were finally fed a meal and given a bed to sleep in. It was an experience few Italian prisoners of war ever forgot.

"The best thing was when I arrived at the barracks at the camp in Monticello (Ark.) at midnight," said Ghilarducci, who would celebrate his 20th birthday at the camp. "They put 24 or 25 of us to a barrack. There were all these beds, one for each of us, with these white sheets. It was a big surprise to sleep in a bed after so long. I start to cry when I think of this. The morning after, we had milk and coffee at big tables."

Safe, though far from home, the Italian prisoners of war were astounded by the wealth and enormity of the nation they had glimpsed from their train windows. But they were also consumed with thoughts of their families in Italy.

"I was happy because we finally had something to eat," Ghilarducci remembered. "We were treated well. We were happy to be out of the war, but we all thought of our people at home. You had to be crazy not to think of them."

Italian POWs pose a dilemma

By September 1943, just as the last of the 50,000 Italian prisoners of war were arriving in the United States, Italy was going through tumultuous changes. Mussolini's 20-year-old government had collapsed in late July. The Americans and British had taken Sicily in just 39 days, and were launching heavy air raids on cities on the Italian mainland. By Sept. 3, they had crossed the Strait of Messina and landed on the toe of the Italian boot.

The Italian leaders who had replaced the Fascist government quickly surrendered to the Allies, and Italy changed sides in the war. The new leaders now pledged to drive their former German ally out of Italy and help end the war. Immediately, the German military in Italy began executing Italian officers and soldiers as rebels and traitors. Italy quickly became a bloody battleground as Allied forces fought to take the Italian peninsula from its German occupiers.

Almost overnight, the Italian prisoners presented a dilemma for the U.S. government. Italy was now on the side of the Allies, which meant that the Italian soldiers were no longer technically prisoners. What was the United States going to do with the 50,000 Italian prisoners of war already interned in camps around the country?

At first, the Allies called the Italian prisoners of war "co-belligerents," an ambiguous term that certainly didn't sound like "allies." By March of 1944, however, the U.S. government had solved its dilemma over its Italian prisoners and clarified their status with a new policy.

The solution was to create the Italian Service Units. Under the new policy, the Italians would not be allowed to go home or engage in combat duties — and they were still officially prisoners — but they could help in the war effort. Italian prisoners could comply by volunteering to join an Italian Service Unit, after they were screened by their American captors to ensure they weren't staunch Fascist sympathizers; most were not.

"Italians leaders and Americans made a speech and told us we could sign a paper that said we could work, but no more weapons, no war," Ghilarducci recalled. "There were some risks in signing. The Germans were still in Italy. We soldiers had our families in Italy. Many were afraid if they signed, the Germans would take revenge on our families."

Others opposed signing "the oath of allegiance" as an act of betrayal against their fallen comrades, one that dismissed the dangers and sacrifices they had faced in fighting for Italy. To some, the oath translated into collaboration with the enemy. But by early April, most had relinquished their doubts. Few had supported Mussolini's long-detested alliance with Hitler or held great fondness for the Germans. Others found no reason to oppose the Allied cause.

"Half the Italian army had relatives in America," remembered my father, Giovanni (John) Merlo, who was captured by the Americans in Sicily on July 21, 1943; he was then 19. "None of us wanted to be at war with America in the first place."

Encouraged by Italy's new leaders to support the Allied cause, some 35,000 out of 50,000 Italian prisoners of war voluntarily signed the document to cooperate with the Allies, according to Keefer. Ghilarducci says he signed it "the first night" it was offered, while he was still at Monticello, Ark.

Those who refused to sign remained behind barbed wire until they were repatriated to Italy in the end of the war. But the Italian prisoners of war who chose to sign, many doing so on Easter Sunday, April 9, 1944, immediately became members of the Italian Service Units. And their lives, once again, changed overnight.

TRANFORMATION

For the last year and a half of the war, Italian prisoners — through the Italian Service Units — provided work that was vital to the war effort. On 66 military installations from New York to San Francisco, including Camp Roberts, the Italians served as a valuable source of manpower in an America that had been drained of its labor force by pressing military needs.

The members of the Italian Service Units loaded and unloaded trucks, railcars and ships. They repaired machinery. They dug ditches, built roads and structures, and transported heavy equipment and supplies. Their morale surged as they were paid for their work, ate regular meals and stayed busy. Their contributions freed up American soldiers for all-important combat duties overseas.

The Italian Service Units were issued their own khaki-colored uniforms, similar to those of American GIs, except that the Italians bore no insignia and wore a patch on their shoulders that said, "Italy," in white letters on a green background. They carried no weapons, of course. Some, like my father, learned to speak, read and write English fluently.

Ghilarducci was sent to a military depot near Philadelphia, where he helped prepare and load weapons destined for the war in Japan and Italy. After a special nine-week training course in automotive repair in Atlanta, Ga., Puccinelli and Merlo were sent to